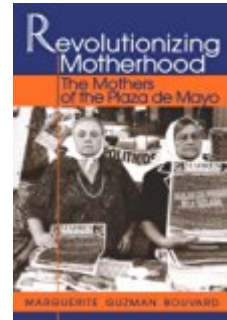


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marguerite Guzman Bouvard. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Latin American Silhouettes)*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994. 278 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2486-0; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2487-7.

Reviewed by Kate Davis (San Francisco State University)
Published on H-LatAm (March, 1996)



Marguerite Guzman Bouvard has written a book that belongs on the reading list for any course on Latin American history. It also must be read by anyone interested in politics, the struggle for human rights, and women's history. The book is a combination of scholarly research and personal experience with the Mothers in Argentina. It is beautifully written, well-organized, and cogently argued.

This book is about motherhood, power, non-violent protest, truth, and activism. It is about courageous women who are not presented as saints. It is about the triumph of emotion (rage and love) over reason in the struggle for power. It is more than women's history, it is a brief, integrated analysis of modern Argentine political history since 1976. One of the many important contributions of this book is that it places women within Argentine history as active agents rather than passive participants involved only through their relationship to men. The impact of the Mothers on the Argentine government, junta and constitutional, is so profound that an analysis that does not include them is clearly lacking.

Bouvard presents a detailed analysis of the policy of "disappearance" under the junta after it gained power in 1976. She includes some graphic details of the kidnapping and torture of the "disappeared." She effectively argues that "the ultimate victim of the policy of disappearance was the family, whose stability, structure, and privacy were deeply affected." (35) Bouvard indicts the U.S. government for its' implicit and often explicit support of the junta and its' violent policies. She exposes the Catholic church's involvement in the junta's violence against the Argentine people. The hierarchy of the Catholic church supported the junta to the extent that priests were present at the detention centers to offer sup-

port and solace to the torturers rather than the prisoners. Her analysis of the political situation in Argentina before, during, and after the junta is persuasive, as is her analysis of the continuing influence of the military on civil affairs.

When the junta fell and constitutional government was restored, the Mothers refused to return to their homes and their previous lives. They not only continued to fight for an accounting of the disappeared, they agitated for punishment for those responsible for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of the disappeared. The trials that were held were a mockery of justice. Bouvard states that "twenty-five percent of those cited for criminal acts were being considered for promotion by the executive branch."(161) Under Menem even the presidents of the junta, Videla and Viola, were granted pardons. (211) However, the Mothers determined to keep these men and all who participated either overtly or covertly in the disappearances in the public consciousness. They refused to let the people or the government of Argentina forget the abuses of the junta. As a result of the betrayal of the constitutional government the Mothers adopted all the dispossessed as their "children" and continued to expand their activism into the arena of human rights.

Bouvard defines militants as those who "placed their social goals above their personal lives and pursued them with missionary zeal." (177) The Mothers' militancy is indisputable. Eventually they understood that their disappeared children were also militants rather than bystanders accidentally caught in a web of violence initiated by an oppressive regime. With the transition to constitutional government, the Mothers "had acquired yet another purpose, a purpose that would entail no less than a

complete transformation of Argentine political culture.” (130) They continued to speak out against oppression and government capitulation to the military. They also continued to be harrassed, physically attacked, and slandered by those in power. However, if they had been mollified by the new government’s calls for national unity and ended or curtailed their activism, they would not have had the enduring effect on concepts of power and revolutionary motherhood with which Bouvard credits them.

The Mothers do not neatly fit into a theoretical framework. The two motivating forces behind their activism and militancy are love and anger rather than political theory or affiliation. While Bouvard states that the Mothers “envision a socialist system free of the domination of special interests” (199) she primarily identifies them as anarchist. After the fall of the junta, in true anarchist fashion, the Mothers political agenda adopted a demand for the total restructuring of the political system.

One of the Mother’s most powerful and deftly-wielded tools was the co-option of the language of those in power. They consistently design their slogans “co-opting the words of the powerful, using them as a means of defiance and a demonstration of their continuing strength.” (205) Bouvard’s analysis of the use of language by the powerless to gain power is very convincing and clearly articulated.

The last two chapters, “The Struggle for Human Rights” and “Women and Political Power,” were the most thought-provoking for me. The Mothers have “created a true democratic anarchism” (234) and “have proved it is possible to carry on an effective political organization without adopting the dominant organizational model.” (223) They reject theory in favor of action, and this allows them to initiate immediate responses to varying situations. In short, they are not bogged down by bureaucracy. Although their “platform” is anarchist, their “association with anarchism is more practical than theoretical.” (228) It is very interesting that the Mothers probably knew little about the 19th- and early-20th-century anarchists and yet that is the model they most closely resemble. “Revolutionary communal anarchism is a recurrent theme in the ongoing human struggle to create political change. Viewed in this light, the Mothers’ organization is a crucial episode in the continual search for freedom and dignity.” (238) Was their anarchism spontaneous rather than the result of a conscious decision? If so, this raises a myriad of questions about the inception of political activism and organization.

Bouvard analyzes the effects the Mothers have on conceptions of women and power. They have transcended the “socially prescribed barriers established for women” in a country where women are “expected to remain passive and isolated from each other.” (243) In their transgression of traditional barriers, the Mothers “brought to their newly acquired political space the consciousness of women.” (244) This consciousness is, interestingly, grounded in motherhood rather than feminist theory. The Mothers reject social norms that confine women to lives as wives and mothers and yet the very basis of their activism and militancy is motherhood. Not only have they co-opted the language of their oppressors, they have co-opted traditional roles and transformed them into a weapon against those who attempt to use those roles to confine them and keep them silent.

The only real criticism I have is in Bouvard’s discussion of the Mother’s support group, The Front for Human Rights. Here she disregards her own arguments about the political acumen of the Mothers. In regard to the group of young supporters, Bouvard would have the reader believe that the Mothers were naive and imperceptive. While the Mothers can easily perceive the true nature of those in power, they “are unable to perceive the actual nature” of their supporters. (197) It is difficult to believe that the Mothers are unaware of their supporters “agenda of creating a Cuban-style revolution in Argentina.” (197) If I accept the Mothers as an effective, aware political force, I must also accept the possibility that they choose to ignore the agenda of their support group.

Revolutionizing Motherhood raises important questions about the relationship between theory and practical activism. It demands a re-conceptualization of the political roles of mothers. It highlights the destabilizing force of truth and non-violence. If political activism, even anarchism, can be so effective without theory or bureaucracy then the very root of oppositional organization must be re-examined. The Mothers have redefined maternity into political action and practical anarchism. The Mothers are frequently criticized by feminists – why? When events contradict the theoretical bases of a movement, the theory must be at least reconsidered. Are feminists so entrenched in theory that we are unable to conceive of the power of motherhood as a political force – even when there is concrete evidence? Has theory and bureaucracy so bogged down opposition movements that they seldom exist as practical activism? These are some of the many questions the book raised for me. I will read it again because I believe there is much that can be missed

on a first reading. Hopefully it will contribute to an expansion of the discourse on roles of women, including mothers, in politics and society.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Kate Davis. Review of Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Latin American Silhouettes)*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=316>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.